

THE  
*RESERVOIR*



## *The Reservoir*

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MONTH 1: THE BIG QUESTIONS

# **Week One**



*What Is Spiritual Formation?*

# MONDAY

## WHAT IS SPIRITUAL FORMATION?

*Spiritual formation is the process by which the human spirit (will) is given a definite form, or character. . . . It happens to everyone. — Dallas Willard*

The inner being of each one of us (our personality, character, and will) is gradually shaped by everything and everyone we spend time with. Most of us are completely unaware of this formation process. When we do become aware of issues in the way we've been formed (for example, a struggle with anger, pride, or insecurity), we often don't know how the problem developed, or what we can do about it. The good news is that there is something we can do about who we are now, and about who we are becoming. An awareness of our own spiritual formation will allow us to become more intentional about what—and who—we let shape us.

**Read:** Philippians 4:4–8

### **Reflect:**

1. There are many forces (families, schools, churches, entertainment, politics, advertising, arts, etc.) competing to “form” the human beings within them. Which forces seem to have the most influence on your own formation and that of those around you?
2. What (and who) has most shaped you and the way you see the world?
3. What is one thing you would like to give more influence to in your formation? What is one thing you'd like to see have less power over you?
4. What does the apostle Paul seem to be saying about spiritual formation in today's passage?

## TUESDAY

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### FORMATION IN JESUS

*Jesus-centered spiritual formation is the process of being transformed into the image of Christ, through a relationship of intimacy with God, by the power of the Spirit, in order to live a good and beautiful life of faith, hope, love, joy, and peace—a life that will be a blessing to oneself and to others and will glorify God now and for all eternity. — James Bryan Smith*

In the life of Jesus we see what a healthy, fully-formed human being looks like—wise, patient, compassionate, energized, self-giving, and completely in sync with the will of his Father. Jesus, then, provides the model and goal for our spiritual formation. But, more than this, he becomes our ongoing teacher and guide, and he gives us his Spirit in order to make healthy formation—and even empowered transformation—possible.

**Read:** John 15:5

**Reflect:**

1. What do you think Jesus means by the phrase “abide in me”?
2. What does “abiding in Jesus” look like in your life? What *might* it look like?
3. Jesus claims, “Apart from me you can do nothing.” Certainly there are people who are productive in various ways apart from Jesus. So what do you think he means?
4. Is the thought of becoming more like Jesus appealing to you? Why? Do you find yourself resisting the idea at any point? Why?

# WEDNESDAY

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## SPIRITUAL FORMATION AS DISCIPLESHIP

*Believing in Jesus and discipleship to Jesus are part of the same action.*  
— Richard Foster

*A disciple is a person who has decided that the most important thing in her life is to learn how to do what Jesus said to do. . . . Disciples simply are people who are constantly revising their affairs to carry through on their decision to follow Jesus. — Dallas Willard*

One of the ways we can think about spiritual formation centered in Jesus is by using the language of *discipleship*. During the time Jesus lived in Galilee, it was common for students to identify a rabbi they wished to emulate and follow him everywhere he went. They were listening, observing, and imitating—living with him so that they could learn to be like him. Today we are still invited to be disciples of Jesus, progressively and systematically rearranging the details of our lives so that we can spend time with him and learn to be like him.

**Read:** Mark 1:16–20; 8:34–37

### **Reflect:**

1. What do you think Jesus means when he connects the decision to be his disciple with both saving your life and losing your life?
2. Imagine Jesus walking up to you today, right in the middle of your job, and saying, “Will you follow me?” Would you have to change anything you are currently doing in order to say yes?

# THURSDAY

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## SPIRITUAL FORMATION AS APPRENTICESHIP

*Apprenticeship centers on immersion in the culture of the master; experientially learning to do what he did through hands-on training. — Gary Moon*

Another way to explore spiritual formation centered around Jesus is to use the model of *apprenticeship*. Apprentices in any craft or trade must pay very close attention to the one they wish to follow. They need practical training—and lots of it! The apprenticeship model is helpful because it reminds us that we need to learn to live our lives the way Jesus lived his. If Jesus stepped away from the busy demands of his life to pray, as his apprentices we should too. If he reached out to the outcast, that's something we need to practice as well. If he quoted Scripture in the wilderness, then we know that part of our learning will be to memorize passages from the Bible. But, as with our discipleship model, we also need to be with him in order to learn from him. So in addition to learning from his earthly life, we also learn from his active presence with us today.

**Read:** John 13:12–17

### **Reflect:**

1. Have you ever had a chance to either apprentice someone in a craft or be an apprentice yourself? If so, what elements were most important in the process?
2. If you decided that your full-time job was to be an apprentice to Jesus, what (if anything) would change in your daily schedule?

# FRIDAY



## SPIRITUAL FORMATION AS FRIENDSHIP

*Prayer is friendship in action. — M. Basil Pennington*

*Spiritual practices at their best are practices of friendship. — Trevor Hudson*

Many people struggle with the idea of relating to God as a friend because they feel it reduces God's majesty and transcendence. And yet Jesus himself said, "I do not call you servants any longer . . . but I have called you friends" (John 15:15). The beautiful thing about *friendship* as a model for our formation in Jesus is that it reminds us that all our spiritual practices (prayer, study, worship, service, etc.) are not spiritual "techniques," but rather ways of being intentional about spending time with the God who deeply desires relationship with us. As God's friends, we will possess not only the seriousness of disciples and the teachability of apprentices, but also the delight of discovering we are his beloved.

**Read:** John 15:9–17

### **Reflect:**

1. Are you comfortable thinking of God as your "friend"? Why or why not?
2. In today's passage, Jesus links friendship with him to friendship with others. Why does he make this connection?
3. Which model of spiritual formation (discipleship, apprenticeship, or friendship) makes the most sense to you? Is there one model you'd like to focus on more than you have before?



MONTH 1: THE BIG QUESTIONS

## **Week Two**



*What Is My Picture of God?*

# MONDAY

## WHY IS MY PICTURE OF GOD SO IMPORTANT?

*What comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us. — A. W. Tozer*

We become like the God we worship. If I believe that God not only loves, but is love, then the more I center my life on him, the more loving I will become. If, however, I actually hold a picture of an angry God, I will gradually become an angrier person. If I worship a trustworthy God, I will have an easier time trusting God and other people. But if my image is of an unreliable God, I will likely become increasingly anxious and controlling. It's vital to uncover the difference between our *professed* images of God—the things we say we believe about him—and our *default* pictures of God—the ideas we hold deep down, perhaps unaware, that are profoundly shaping us.

**Read:** Psalm 136

### **Reflect:**

1. What are some dominant pictures of God within the culture?
2. Recall your childhood picture of God. Do you think it still shapes the way you see him now?
3. Choose three words to describe God. What might these three words teach you about yourself and your view of God?
4. Do you find yourself relating to God differently in seasons of stress or difficulty than in happier times?

## TUESDAY

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GOD IS GREATER (AND BETTER) THAN WE IMAGINE

*Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable.*  
— *Psalms 145:3*

The psalmist tells us that God's greatness is "unsearchable"—his greatness is so vast that we can't begin to understand all of it. This means that while encounters with God are significant, God is always greater than our particular experience of him. It reminds us that while the language we have to describe God is helpful, God will always be more than anything we can say about him. And it helps us see that while our theology and traditions can serve to point us to God, he will always transcend our doctrines and denominations. God is big! The good news is that we will eternally be discovering more and more of his unsearchable greatness.

**Read:** 2 Chronicles 6:18–21; Acts 17:28

**Reflect:**

1. Does the idea of God's greatness being "unsearchable" excite you or frighten you? Why?
2. Have the churches you've attended done a good job of remembering the greatness of God? Have they ever tried to reduce God to a more describable size?
3. In 2 Chronicles 6, King Solomon is praying a prayer of dedication over the temple. He recognizes that the temple can't begin to contain God's greatness, but he still boldly asks God to hear the prayers that are prayed there. On what basis, do you think, did Solomon believe he could ask an unfathomably great God to pay attention to his prayers?

# WEDNESDAY

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## GOD'S CHARACTER IS REVEALED IN JESUS

*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. — Jesus (John 14:9)*

*[Jesus is] the Divine life operating under human conditions. — C. S. Lewis*

One of the ways we can check to see if our picture of God is healthy is to ask, Is there anything I believe about God's character that is in conflict with the character of Christ? In his teaching, his actions, his sacrificial death, and his victorious resurrection, Jesus of Nazareth reveals to us the character of God. If we ever wonder if God is truly a God of both unsearchable greatness and unending love, compassion, and goodness, we can look at Jesus and say a resounding yes.

**Read:** John 14:8–10; Colossians 1:15; Luke 15:1–2, 11–32

### **Reflect:**

1. Do you agree that there is nothing in God's character that is in conflict with the character of Christ? Why or why not?
2. What does Jesus' portrayal of the human father in Luke 15 say about the character of God the Father?
3. Look again at Luke 15:1–2. What were the religious people around Jesus upset about? What do their complaints reveal about their own pictures of God?
4. Reread Colossians 1:15. Is there anything in your own picture of the "invisible God" that seems at odds with the visible "image" of Jesus Christ?

# THURSDAY

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GOD IS CLOSER THAN WE CAN IMAGINE

*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

— Jesus (Matthew 28:20)

Earlier in the week, we looked at 2 Chronicles 6:18–21 and asked how Solomon could be so aware of God’s surpassing greatness and yet still feel confident that God would hear his prayers. In the verse above, Jesus tells us that Solomon’s confidence was not misplaced. God is greater than we can fathom, but he’s also closer and more accessible than we can imagine. Better yet, for us born after the earthly life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we know that the kingdom of God is not only magnificent, it has come near.

**Read:** Psalm 73:28; Acts 17:27–28; Matthew 4:17

**Reflect:**

1. In Matthew 4:17, Jesus announces that “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” What do you think he means?
2. There is evidence that although God draws close to human beings in the Old Testament, when Jesus arrives, in the New Testament, he seems to be announcing an increased level of access. What has changed?
3. Sometimes we use the term “transcendence” (God is above and beyond all things) to talk about God’s greatness and “immanence” (God is present, active, and near) to express God’s accessibility. Which aspect of God’s character do you find harder to understand?

# FRIDAY

## GOD IS THREE-IN-ONE

*The Trinity suddenly filled my heart with the greatest joy. And I understood that in heaven it will be like that for ever for those who come there. For the Trinity is God, God is the Trinity; the Trinity is our maker and protector; the Trinity is our dear friend forever, our everlasting joy and bliss, through our Lord Jesus Christ. — Julian of Norwich*

Jesus teaches that God is more wonderful—and more complex—than we could ever imagine. Although the Bible never uses the word Trinity, biblical writers teach that God exists in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Remember that the Trinity is not a puzzle to be solved but a wonder to be worshiped. God is one. And God is also three in one, a relationship of love we are invited to enter into by faith.

**Read:** John 3:17; John 5:17; John 14:26

### **Reflect:**

1. God the Father is distinct from God the Son and God the Spirit, yet all three are one God. Julian of Norwich writes that the Trinity “filled my heart with the greatest joy.” How do you find yourself responding to God as Trinity? How might we, by faith, move ever more deeply into the wonder and beauty of the Trinity?
2. God’s triune nature tells us that he has never been lonely. Yet he created us to be in relationship with him. Why?

MONTH 1: THE BIG QUESTIONS

## **Week Three**



*What Is My Picture of Myself?*

# MONDAY

## WHY IS MY PICTURE OF MYSELF SO IMPORTANT?

*I know well the deadening effects of not knowing who or whose we are. . . . When we see ourselves wrongly, we often end up in the muddy pit of worthlessness with its attendant despair. — Trevor Hudson*

Dr. Frank Lake specialized in working with missionaries who had become exhausted or bitter in their work. After countless interviews, he concluded that the problem for many of these people was that they were trying to use their work to achieve acceptance—to prove their worth to God, others, and themselves. Lake argued that we can only do healthy, sustainable work when we are operating from acceptance—when we realize there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and nothing we can do to make God love us less. This week we'll ponder whether we are living for or from acceptance.

**Read:** Psalm 139:1–18

### **Reflect:**

1. Think about a group you've been part of that struggled to work well together. Did any members of the group feel unaccepted? If so, how did that affect the team dynamics?
2. Dr. Lake suggested that it is dangerous to use our work (or our ministry, or our roles as friends and family members) to try to gain acceptance with God or others. Why is that?
3. As you read Psalm 139, the psalmist seems to feel accepted by God. Where do you think he got that sense of acceptance?



## TUESDAY

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### I AM MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

*God formed human beings with his own hands. . . . He traced his own form on the formation, so that what would be seen would be of divine form.*

*Humankind was formed as the image of God and set on the earth.*

— Irenaeus

Human beings have a unique place in creation. We are the only creatures made in the image of God, breathed into life from his own Spirit. The way we were created brings us into a special relationship with God. As image-bearers of the living God, how we treat ourselves and others matters beyond measure.

**Read:** Genesis 1

**Reflect:**

1. At what point in Genesis 1 does God move from calling his creation “good” to calling it “very good”?
2. In Genesis 1:28, God commands his image-bearers to help govern creation with him. How does this mandate relate to your own vocation and way of life?
3. If you could live today fully aware of your unique value as a person who bears the image of God, how would that awareness change your perspective . . . and your actions?
4. If you could see each person you encounter for the next week as God’s beloved image-bearer, how might that change your interactions?

# WEDNESDAY

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## I AM GOD'S BELOVED

*All I want to say to you is “You are the Beloved,” and all I can hope is that you can hear those words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. — Henri Nouwen*

*Knowing myself to be beloved of God is slowly becoming more than intellectual conviction; it is gently developing into the core truth of my everyday existence. — Trevor Hudson*

Before Jesus began his ministry, his Father declared publicly, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). While we might think these words only apply to God’s Son, Jesus himself tells us, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you” (John 15:9). We too, like Jesus, are the beloved of God. The world is full of voices that tell us we can never have enough or be enough. It’s critically important that we rediscover our value as God’s beloved image-bearers.

**Read:** Matthew 17:1–13; John 13:23

### **Reflect:**

1. Why do you think the Father publicly affirms his love for Jesus a second time in Matthew 17:5?
2. How does the apostle John describe himself in John 13:23?
3. Is it possible for you to picture yourself as “the disciple Jesus loves”? Why or why not?
4. Is it possible for you to picture other people as “the ones Jesus loves”? Why or why not?

# THURSDAY

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## I AM ACCEPTED

*My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it. — Brennan Manning*

What if we had to wait to come to Jesus until we were worthy of him? We'd never get there! Yet, too often we find ourselves slipping into the mind-set of waiting until we're "just a little better" before approaching the throne of grace. How strange to attempt to earn the acceptance that is freely given to us!

**Read:** John 3:16; 1 John 4:16–19

### **Reflect:**

1. Do you ever find yourself thinking that God loves you more when you are doing well than he does when you are falling into sin? Read John 3:16 (as familiar as it may be) carefully. Did God send Jesus to the world in order to make the world loveable, or did he send Jesus to the world because he already loved it?
2. If God loves us no matter what, and we are already accepted, why does God care so much that we become holy people?
3. John writes that God's love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). And yet many of us experience fear when we think we are not worthy to come before God. How do our pictures of God influence that fear? How do our pictures of ourselves influence that fear?
4. According to this passage in 1 John, who is always the initiator in our relationship with God?

# FRIDAY



## I AM INVITED

*[God's] invitation has long been on public record. You can hardly look anywhere across the human scene and not encounter it. It is literally "blowing in the wind." A door of welcome seems open to everyone without exception. — Dallas Willard*

Author Philip Yancey once said that the plotline of the whole Bible is “God wants his family back.” From Genesis to Revelation, God extends invitation after invitation—“not wanting any to perish” (2 Peter 3:9). The truth is, whether you feel close to God or, like the prodigal son, you’ve been living off in a “far country,” you are always loved, wanted, accepted, redeemed . . . and invited to repent—change directions—and come back home.

**Read:** Matthew 11:28; Mark 1:17; John 15:4

### **Reflect:**

1. Billy Graham identified the three verses above as the “Three Invitations of Christ.” He called the one in Matthew 11:28 “The Invitation to Come Rest.” What would you call the other two?
2. This week, have you detected any distortions in your picture of yourself that need correction? How about in the way you see other people?

MONTH 1: THE BIG QUESTIONS

## **Week Four**



*What Is My Picture of the Gospel?*

# MONDAY

## THE GOSPEL IS MORE THAN THE FORGIVENESS OF SIN

*Can we seriously believe that God would establish a plan for us that essentially bypasses the awesome needs of present human life and leaves human character untouched? — Dallas Willard*

The word gospel means “good news.” If you ask many Christ-followers, in many parts of the world, “What is the gospel of Jesus Christ?” they will answer that it is the forgiveness of sins so that we can go to heaven when we die. This answer is not wrong—Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection make it possible for our sins to be forgiven. But a gospel that solely deals with the forgiveness of sin is incomplete. The good news that Jesus proclaimed is the availability of a completely different kind of life—a life that changes us from the inside out, starting now.

**Read:** John 10:7–10

### **Reflect:**

1. What do you think Jesus means in John 10 when he says he is the “gate for the sheep?”
2. In verse 10, Jesus says he came that we “may have life, and have it abundantly.” Do you think he is referring only to the afterlife? Or do you believe he is saying something about human existence for people living here and now?
3. What picture of the gospel (“good news”) are you most familiar with? Is it a gospel primarily concerned with the forgiveness of sins and the promise of heaven in the future, or does it include a full picture of the availability of another kind of life here and now?

# TUESDAY

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## THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

*Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” — Mark 1:14-15*

Jesus primarily proclaims his gospel by announcing the fact that, with his arrival, the “kingdom of God has come near.” In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus also teaches us to pray for God’s kingdom to break more and more fully into the world (“Your kingdom come . . . on earth as it is in heaven”). The kingdom of God is the place where God reigns—where what he wants to be done is done. The apostle Paul describes God’s kingdom as a kingdom of “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). The invitation of the gospel is for us to take our own little kingdoms (our lives and spheres of influence) and align them with the kingdom of God, so that we can help bring in his kingdom wherever we live.

**Read:** Luke 4:42–43; Colossians 1:9–14

### **Reflect:**

1. In Luke 4:43, what does Jesus say is the reason he was sent?
2. In the Colossians passage, the apostle Paul lists “redemption” and the “forgiveness of sins” as things we receive in the “kingdom of the Son.” What other things from God (aspects of God’s kingdom) does Paul list and pray for in that passage?
3. If the kingdom of God reigned completely in your community, what would be different? What would change if God’s kingdom took over completely in your own heart?

# WEDNESDAY



## THE GOSPEL CHANGES EVERYTHING

*Spiritual depth and renewal come, as and when they come, as part of the larger package. But that package itself is about being delivered from evil; about God's kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven. — N. T. Wright*

One of the things that happens when our picture shifts from a gospel that deals solely with the forgiveness of sins to a gospel that announces the availability of the kingdom of God is that we begin to realize that our personal decision to say yes to Jesus has very public—even cosmic—implications. When we decide to follow Jesus, we agree to become a part of his kingdom mission—to bring his truth, justice, love, and liberation to every aspect of his creation. We become part of something much bigger than ourselves, and the adventure of kingdom living begins!

**Read:** Luke 4:16–21

### **Reflect:**

1. Why do you think Jesus chose to read this passage from Isaiah?
2. What do you think Jesus was saying about the nature and purpose of the kingdom of God?
3. Are there areas of your life where you can more fully cooperate with God and his kingdom?
4. Have you been taught to think of the gospel of Jesus more as an invitation to a personal decision or as an invitation to a cosmic mission? Is there a way it can be both?



# THURSDAY

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## THE GOSPEL MEANS ETERNAL LIFE STARTS NOW

*You see, the goal of the Christian life is not simply to get us into heaven, but to get heaven into us! — Richard Foster*

On Monday, we explored the idea that the gospel means not only the forgiveness of sins but the availability of another kind of life—life in the kingdom of God. Jesus calls this kind of life “eternal life.” Notice how he defines “eternal life” in his prayer in John 17:3: “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” Jesus seems to be saying that eternal life does not begin when you die, but rather it begins when you come to know the Father through Jesus himself. Eternal life, for those who say yes to Jesus, starts now.

**Read:** John 14:6; 1 John 5:11; Colossians 3:1–17

### **Reflect:**

1. Consider Jesus’ self-description as “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). In this passage, do you think Jesus is offering to take us to a destination (i.e., he can “get us to heaven”) or that he is the destination himself (eternal life is found in him)? Could it be both?
2. Practically speaking, does it make any difference how we live our lives if we think eternal life starts now rather than after we die?
3. In Colossians 3, how does the apostle Paul describe life in Christ? What does this life include? What does it rule out?
4. Dallas Willard has argued, “The simple and wholly adequate word for salvation in the New Testament is ‘life.’” Do you agree or disagree? Why?

# FRIDAY



## SAYING YES TO THE GOSPEL

*I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. — Ephesians 3:17–18 NIV*

Earlier this month, we explored the idea that we become like the God we worship. We might also say that we live out the gospel we believe. If we think Jesus came only to make a way for us to get to heaven after we die, we will say yes to the gospel and then potentially go on living much as we did before. If, however, we understand that Jesus came to invite us to a completely different life, serving a different king, living in his kingdom, and directly experiencing his love and life and power—our lives will become radically different. We are invited to say yes to the gospel that Jesus actually proclaimed, and to step into the kingdom of God now.

**Read:** Ephesians 3:14–21

### **Reflect:**

This month, we wrestled with four big questions: What is spiritual formation? What is my picture of God? What is my picture of myself? What is my picture of the gospel?

1. Are you answering any of those four questions differently now than you would have a month ago?
2. Which of the four questions do you think is the most important in your own spiritual formation?



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